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AUTHOR Sharp, William L.; Walter, James K.
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that examined the "health" of the superintendency as perceived by superintendents in two states. Questionnaires sent to 307 Illinois superintendents elicited 227 responses, a 74 percent response rate, and questionnaires sent to 137 Massachusetts principals yielded 104 responses, a 76 percent response rate. Superintendents in both states expressed satisfaction with their salaries and relationships with the community. Both groups of superintendents agreed that the board tended to micromanage the school district and that the job adversely affected their family lives. However, the percentage of Massachusetts superintendents expressing adverse effects on their physical and mental health was much higher. A greater percentage of Massachusetts superintendents than Illinois superintendents described their relationships with school boards in negative terms. The data show that Massachusetts superintendents had little input into their contracts, were not initially hired for the maximum number of years allowed by law, and were not selected unanimously by their boards. Massachusetts superintendents were also older and from larger school districts than were their Illinois counterparts. (LMI)

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The Health of the School Superintendency

William L. Sharp

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

James K. Walter

Salem State College

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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The Health of the School Superintendency

INTRODUCTION

In an earlier study (Sharp & Newman, 1991), most school superintendents were found to have thought that they were having difficulty with their boards. But, they also felt that other superintendents had good relationships with their boards--which was not true. The researchers called this the "grass is greener" effect. A more recent study looked at superintendents in those districts having financial troubles to see if superintendent turnover was worse in these districts and whether it was related to the financial condition of the district. It was found that the financial condition of the district did not relate to superintendent turnover (Sharp, 1995). Other recent research on superintendents have studied involuntary turnover in small towns (Eaton & Sharp, 1996).

The purpose of this study was to examine the "health" of the superintendency as perceived by the superintendents themselves. How did they feel about their relationships with their boards, the community, the teachers? Were they satisfied with their salaries? What effect did the job have on their own physical and mental health? Did it affect their

family life? Would they become superintendents again if they knew what they know now?

METHODOLOGY

Using a list of all school districts in the states of Illinois and Massachusetts, a random sample was taken in each state. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a random sample of 272 of the Illinois 922 school superintendents would be sufficient for a 95% confidence level. Questionnaires were sent to 307 superintendents in Illinois. Of those sent, 227 were returned and were usable, for a return rate of 73.9%. In Massachusetts, there are 275 school districts. Questionnaires were sent to 137 of those districts, with 104 superintendents responding, or 75.9%. In total, 444 superintendents were went questionnaires with 331, or 74.5% responding in the two states. (Illinois and Massachusetts were selected because the two researchers had been superintendents in these states and are now in higher education in these same states.)

The data were subjected to a frequency analysis (both states) and a Pearson correlation (Illinois only) using SPSS for Macintosh 6.1 on the College of Education network at Southern Illinois University at

Carbondale.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While it was anticipated that the results would be quite similar in the two states, this was not the case at all. So, instead of adding the data from both states together, the results were studied separately and are presented separately in this report.

Illinois

In spite of what some people say about the job of the superintendent, the results of the study with Illinois superintendents seem to imply that superintendents are happy with their positions. Of those responding, 93.4% said they were totally (54.2%) or somewhat satisfied with their relationship with their boards and were being treated professionally by them (93.0%). Also, 88.5% said they were satisfied with the salaries they were being paid. With regard to the relationships that the superintendents had with other groups, 96.0% were satisfied with their relationships with the community, 95.6% were happy with the relationships with the teachers, and even 91.2% felt that they had established good relationships with the teachers' union. When asked

about strikes, only 0.9% said they had ever been a superintendent during a strike.

Some people have suggested that school boards are out of date and should be replaced by some other arrangement. When surveyed, the Illinois superintendents supported the current system with 70.0% favoring retaining school boards as the best way to govern school districts.

It was found that the larger the district, the more unhappy the superintendents felt about their relations with the community, while those in the larger districts felt more satisfied with relations with teachers and the union leadership. It may be the case that those in larger communities felt that they could not "reach" the large community as well as those in smaller districts. On the other hand, the mere size of the larger districts may have prevented the superintendent from activities (like directing teacher contract negotiations) which would have hurt the relationship with teachers and unions, while those in smaller districts had to take on these types of tasks personally.

Not every statistic was optimistic, however. One of the perceived problems of modern boards is the tendency to micromanage the district instead of letting the administration run the district. The responses indicated that 61.2% felt that their boards sometimes tried to

micromanage their districts. Also, 64.8% stated that they sometimes felt that the job was too much for too little pay, and 39.2% felt that at least one board member had tried to "stab them in the back."

The superintendents seemed to think that they received more respect from the board members for their work than from the community as a whole. However, those in the larger districts seemed to feel that they did not receive as much respect from their boards as those in smaller districts.

The superintendents were asked about the job and how it affected their health. Over half claimed that it did affect them, with 58.6% stating that it affected their physical health and 57.3% saying it affected their mental health. In addition, 73.2% reported that they felt that the job of superintendent adversely affected their family life.

In spite of these qualifications, the superintendents were happy to be superintendents. They stated (75.8%) that they never felt that the superintendency was a trap in which they were stuck, although as districts increased in size, there was a tendency to describe the job as a trap. The superintendents were asked, "If you had known what you know now about the job, would you still become a superintendent?" The response was overwhelmingly positive as only 10.1% said they would not

want to become a superintendent the second time around. Again, this small negative group increased as districts increased in size.

To conclude, the Illinois superintendents who responded to this study were satisfied with their relationships with their boards, with their salaries, and would become superintendents again if given the chance. And, it seems that superintendents in smaller districts tend to be happier than those in larger districts. The health of the Illinois school superintendency is pretty good.

Massachusetts

The difference in responses from the two states was striking. This will be detailed later in this section. However, there were some similarities, which were positive in both cases: Superintendents from both states seemed satisfied with their salaries, with their relationships with the community, and few had been a superintendent during a strike.

There were others areas of agreement, though the degree of agreement was not the same. Both groups felt that they had a good relationship with the teachers and the teachers' union, although the scores were higher in Illinois:

	Illinois	Mass.
Satisfied with relationship with teachers	95.6%	69.2%
Satisfied with relationships with union	91.2%	71.1%

Also, both agreed that the board tended to micromanage the district, that the job was too much for too little pay (somewhat contradictory to their overall feelings about salary), and that the job adversely affected their family life:

	Illinois	Mass.
Board always or sometimes micromanages	61.2%	89.4%
The job is too much for too little pay	64.8%	93 3%
The job adversely affects family life	73.2%	92.4%

A pattern can be seen even in these areas of agreement. The Massachusetts superintendents have a more negative attitude toward the job. This is even more apparent in those areas where there is disagreement. While the Illinois superintendents seemed to have an overall positive perception of their jobs, the perceptions of their colleagues in Massachusetts are definitely more negative. Below is a chart showing the responses from both states to some of the questions

asked in the questionnaire. In every case, the Illinois response is much more positive.

	Illinois	Mass.
The board voted unanimously to hire the supt.	86.8%	24.0%
The supt. had input into contract conditions	82.4%	19.2%
First contract had maximum yrs. allowed	76.2%	43.3%
Supt. satisfied with evaluation instrument	72.3%	49.1%
Supt. satisfied with relationship with bd.	93.4%	40.3%
Supt. satisfied with bd.'s behavior at mtgs.	88.6%	32.7%
Board treats supt. as a professional	93.0%	39.4%
The board doubts my ability	19.4%	67.3%
Supt. spends too much time with bd. members	45.0%	88.4%
Job is too much for the bd. respect shown	34.0%	86.6%
Job adversely affects physical health	58.6%	93.3%
Job adversely affects mental health	57.3%	95.2%
Supt. would retire early if possible	48.0%	76.0%

Here are some areas that are particularly telling in showing the differences in attitude between the respondents in both states:

	Illinois	Mass.
Bd. members have "stabbed me in the back"	39.2%	92.3%
Supt. feels he/she is stuck in a trap	22.0%	94.2%
Bds. are passe and should be eliminated	21.6%	76.0%
Supt. would choose the same career again	85.0%	37.5%

There are probably several reasons for the vast differences shown in the data gathered. Obviously, the Massachusetts superintendents did not have much input into their contracts, were not initially hired for the maximum years allowed by law, and were not selected unanimously by their boards. Thus, a negative condition was established from the very beginning. In addition, demographic data (detailed in the next section) show that Massachusetts superintendents are older; yet, many more are in their first superintendency, showing a large turnover in that state. And, boards tend to meet much more often in Massachusetts, giving more of a chance for negative activities between the board and the superintendent and more micromanaging from the board. In addition, reform legislation in Massachusetts has limited some of the powers of the board, making some board members angry that they cannot do what they want to do. As a result, they take out their anger on the superintendent, the only person

over which they now have control. Finally, the demographics section below shows that Massachusetts superintendents tend to work in larger districts than those in Illinois. The Illinois correlation study showed that superintendents in larger districts tended to be less satisfied than those in smaller districts. If this is true, then the overall larger size in Massachusetts may also contribute to the overall unhappiness of the superintendents in that state.

DEMOGRAPHICS

For those interested, here are some demographics from the study:

	Illinois	Mass.
The major age range of those responding	46-50	51-55
Percentage saying this is first superintendency	46.3%	69.2%
Board holds more than one meeting per month	26.9%	81.7%
Majority of board members are women	6.1%	40.4%
Gender of responding superintendents-Female	7.5%	6.7%
Highest degree is doctorate	41.4%	56.7%
The major experience (yrs. in educ.) range	21-25	26+

When asked about the size of their districts (students), the superintendents in Illinois responded that 31.3% were in districts of 501-1000, 25.1% were in those of 1001-2500, and 25.1% were in districts under 500 students. Superintendents in Massachusetts, in contract, worked in larger districts: 34.6% were in districts of 2001-3000 students, 27.9% worked in districts of 1001-2000, and 22.1% were employed in districts of 3001-5000.

CORRELATION STUDY

ILLINOIS SUPERINTENDENT RESPONSES

The Size of the District (Students) and...	Pearson r	Significance
Unsatisfactory relationship with the Community	.884	.0101

Unsatisfactory relationship with the Teachers	.988	-.0010
Unsatisfactory relationship with the Teachers' union	.690	-.0275
Superintendency is not a trap and supt. Is not stuck in that trap	.789	-.0184
Much respect from the board	.759	-.0211
Would want to become a supt. again	.606	-.0355

Note: A .05 level of significance was used. Some of the variable above are worded in a negative fashion even though the questionnaire did not word them in that way. The questionnaire used responses that varied from "totally satisfied" with a score of 1 to "totally unhappy" with a score of 4, for example.

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